The Moral Argument for God’s Existence

By Paul Copan

Philosopher John Rist is right; there is "widely admitted to be a crisis in contemporary Western debate about ethical foundations."[1] It seems that, ultimately, the crisis is the result of approaching ethics

without reference to God. When morality is severed from its theological roots, secular ethics cannot sustain itself – it withers and dies.

I can only sketch out a brief defense of the connection between God and objective moral values (which I have done more extensively elsewhere).[2] I will argue that if objective moral values exist, then God exists; objective moral values do exist; therefore, God exists. To resolve our ethics crisis, we must recognize the character of a good God (in whose image valuable humans have been made) as the necessary foundation of ethics, human rights, and human dignity.

1. Objective Moral Values Exist: They Are Properly Basic: Moral values exist whether or not a person or culture believes them ("objective"). Normally-functioning human beings take these for granted as basic to their well-being and flourishing.

• Humans do not have to find out what is moral by reading the Bible such knowledge is available to all people. Romans 2:14-15 says that those without God's special revelation (Scripture, Jesus Christ) can know right from wrong. They have God's general revelation of his basic moral law in their conscience, "Gentiles, who do not have the Law [of Moses] do instinctively the things of the Law". (Rom 2:14, NASB). No wonder they have been made in the image of God (Gen. 1:26-7). They're constituted to

function properly when they live according to God's design. So people (including atheists) whose hearts have not been hardened or self-deceived will have the same sorts of moral instincts as Christians-that torturing babies for fun (along with rape or adultery) is wrong, and kindness is good.

When a person says, "Maybe murder or rape isn't really wrong," he does not need an argument. He is self-deceived. If he really believes this, he needs spiritual or psychological help because he is just not functioning properly. Even relativists who claim that someone's values may be true for him but not for others are likely those who say, "I have rights" or "You ought to be tolerant." But rights and tolerance do not make any sense if relativism is correct. Rather, they entail that objective moral values exist.

• *Just as we generally trust our sense perceptions as reliable (unless there is good reason to doubt them), we should treat general moral intuitions (aversion to torturing babies for fun, rape, murder) as innocent until proven guilty*. Why do we trust our five senses? Most of us find they are regularly reliable. Even if we misperceive things once in a while, we are wise to pay attention to our senses rather than consistently doubt them. Similarly, we have basic moral instincts-for example, a revulsion at taking innocent human life or of raping (the "*Yuck* factor") or an inward affirmation regarding self-sacrifice for the well-being of my child (the "*Yes* factor"). The burden of proof falls on those denying or

questioning basic moral principles. We are wise to pay attention to these basic moral instincts – even if these intuitions need occasional fine-tuning.

Morally-sensitive humans can get the basics right regarding morality. In the appendix of C.S. Lewis' book *The Abolition of Man*,[3] he lists various virtues that have been accepted across the ages and civilizations (Greek, Egyptian, Babylonian, Native American, Indian, Hebrew, etc.). Stealing and murder are condemned in these law codes while honoring parents and keeping marriage vows are applauded.

Some might argue: Aren't there moral conflicts as well? Some cultures permit polygamy, for instance. Yes, but marriage customs and vows that bind marriages together also prohibit adultery.
While *applications* and *expressions* of moral principles may differ from culture to culture, there are basic moral principles that cut across cultural lines. What happens when we encounter (at least on the face of it) conflicting moral principles? *We start with morally clear cases and work to the unclear*. In light of apparent moral conflict, it would be a faulty jump to conclude that morality is relative. As lexicographer Samuel Johnson put it, "The fact that there is such a thing as twilight does not mean that we cannot distinguish between day and night."

• *Moral principles are discovered, not invented.* Moral reforms (abolishing slavery, advocating a woman's right to vote, promoting civil rights for blacks) make no sense unless objective moral values exists. Even if creating the atmosphere for reform may take time (even centuries), this does not imply that morality just evolves during human history and is just a human invention. Rather, it more readily suggests that moral principles can be discovered and are worth pursuing, even at great cost.

Atheist philosopher Kai Nielsen acknowledges this point: "It is more reasonable to believe such elemental things [wife-beating, child abuse] to be evil than to believe any skeptical theory that tells us we cannot know or reasonably believe any of these things to be evil…I firmly believe that this is bedrock and right and that anyone who does not believe it cannot have probed deeply enough into the grounds of his moral beliefs."[4]

2. God and Objective Morality Are Closely Connected: It is not unusual to hear, "Atheists can be good without God." Atheist Michael Martin argues that theists give the same reasons as atheists for condemning rape: it violates the victim's rights, damages society. What Martin really means is that atheists can be good without believing in God, but they would not be good (have intrinsic worth, moral responsibility, etc.) without God. (Indeed, nothing would exist without him.) That is, because humans are made in God's image, they can know what is good even if they do not believe in God. Atheists and

theists can affirm the same values, but theists can ground belief in human rights and dignity because we are all made in the image of a supremely valuable being.

Just think about it: *Intrinsically-valuable, thinking persons do not come from impersonal, non-conscious, unguided, valueless processes over time. A personal, self-aware, purposeful, good God provides the natural and necessary context for the existence of valuable, rights-bearing, morally-responsible human persons*. That is, personhood and morality are necessarily connected; moral values are rooted in personhood. Without God (a personal Being), no persons – and thus no moral values – would exist at all: *no personhood, no moral values*. Only if God exists can moral properties be realized.

3. Non-theistic Ethical Theories Will Be Incomplete and Inadequate: Some secularists would suggest that we can have *ethical systems that make no reference to God* (e.g., Aristotle, Kant). However, while they may make some very positive contributions to ethical discussion (regarding moral virtue/character or universal moral obligations), their systems are still incomplete. They still do not tell us why human beings have intrinsic value, rights, and moral obligations.

What about *naturalistic evolutionary ethics*, in which we develop an awareness of right or wrong and moral obligation to help us survive/reproduce? Ethical awareness has only biological worth.[5] Such an approach leaves us with the following problems: First, *can we even trust our minds if we are nothing more than the products of naturalistic evolution, trying to fight, feed, flee, and reproduce*? Charles Darwin had a "horrid doubt" that since the human mind has developed from lower animals, why would anyone trust it? Why trust the convictions of a monkey's mind?[6] The naturalistic evolutionary process is interested in fitness/survival-not in true belief; so not only is objective morality undermined so is rational thought. Our beliefs-including moral ones-may help us *survive*, but there is no reason to think they are *true*. Belief in objective morality or human dignity may help us survive, but it may be completely false. The problem with skepticism (including moral skepticism) is that *I am assuming a trustworthy reasoning process to arrive at the conclusion that I cannot trust my reasoning*! If we trust our rational and moral faculties, we will assume a theistic outlook: Being made in the image of a truthful, rational, good Being makes sense of why we trust our senses/moral intuitions.

In addition, we are left with this problem: if human beings are simply the product of naturalistic evolution, then we have no foundation for moral obligation and human dignity. This could easily undermine moral motivation. The sexual predator and cannibal Jeffrey Dahmer acknowledged the

seriousness of the matter: “If it all happens naturalistically, what’s the need for a God? Can’t I set my own rules? Who owns me? I own myself.”[7]

To reinforce further the point about the God-morality connection, a number of atheists and skeptics have noted it. The late atheist philosopher J. L. Mackie said that moral properties are “queer” given naturalism “if there are objective values, they make the existence of a god more probable than it would have been without them. Thus we have a defensible argument from morality to the existence of a god.”[8]Agnostic Paul Draper observes, “A moral world is very probable on theism.”[9]

As the Declaration of Independence asserts, humans are “endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights.” This good Creator is the true foundation of ethics and the ultimate hope of rescuing it from its present crisis.

Endnotes:

[1] John Rist, *Real Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 1.

[2] See Paul Copan, "Is Michael Martin a Moral Realist? *Sic et Non*." *Philosophia Christi*, new series 1/2 (1999): 45-72; "Atheistic Goodness Revisited: A Personal Reply to Michael Martin," *Philosophia Christi*, new series 2/1 (2000); p. 91-104; "The Moral Argument" in *The Rationality of Theism*, ed. Paul Copan and Paul K. Moser (London: Routledge, 2003), pp.149-74; "A Moral Argument" in *To Every One An Answer: A Case for the Christian Worldview*: *Essays in Honor of Norman L. Geisler,* eds. Francis Beckwith, William Lane Craig, and J. P. Moreland (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2004), pp. 108-23; "Morality and Meaning Without God: Another Failed Attempt," *Philosophia Christi*, new series 6/1 (2004); pp. 295-304; "God, Hume, and Objective Morality" in *In Defense of Natural Theology: A Collection of New Essays in the Philosophy of Religion*, eds. Douglas R. Groothuis and James R. Sennett (Downers, Grove, InterVarsity Press, 2005), pp. 200-25.

[3] C.S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man* (San Francisco: HarperSF, 2001).

[4] Kai Nielsen, *Ethics Without God* (Buffalo: Prometheus Books, 1990), pp. 10-11.

[5] Michael Ruse, *The Darwinian Paradigm* (London: Routledge, 1989), p. 262.

[6] Letter (3 July 1881) to Wm. G. Down, in *The Life and Letters of Charles Darwin*, ed. Francis Darwin (London: John Murray, Abermarle Street, 1887), pp. 1:315-16.

[7] Jeffrey Dahmer: *The Monster Within*, A&E Biography (1996).

[8] J. L. Mackie, *The Miracle of Theism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982), pp. 115-16.

[9] In Greg Ganssle, "Necessary Moral Truths" *Philosophia Christi*, new series 2, 2/1 (2000), p. 111.